### Explanation/Format

*Resolved: anti-Blackness is ontological.*

1. Read the 1AC. The goal of the affirmative is to prove that anti-Blackness is ontological. Prepare to defend Wilderson’s arguments based exclusively on the four cards in the 1AC.

2. Read the 1NC and negative backline cards. Prepare to answer Wilderson’s arguments using these materials.

3. There are 16 negative cards: 3 in the frontline and 13 in the backlines. Two students will be assigned each negative card. One student should cross-examine the card and the other student should answer a cross-examination of it. Students will be assigned to cards based on where they are sitting. In order, student pairs will conduct a one-minute cross-examination of each card. Based on these cross-examinations, all students should take notes (and, if necessary, do additional research/reading) so that they are better prepared to defend the negative’s evidence.

4. Two students will be selected to represent the affirmative and two students will be selected to represent the negative. The format of the debate is as follows:

1AC — assumed, not read

CX of 1AC — 2 minutes

1NC — read aloud, not timed

CX of 1NC — 2 minutes

2AC — 1 minute 30 seconds (no cards)

CX of 2AC — 2 minutes

2NC — 6 minutes

CX of 2NC — 2 minutes

1AR — 2 minutes

2NR — 2 minutes

2AR — 2 minutes

### 1AC

#### First, the United States federal government *itself*—not just *particular policies*—is irredeemably unethical. Debate should be a forum to challenge America’s legitimacy using unflinching paradigmatic analysis, *not* a forum for recuperating civil society through so-called progressive policies and plans.

Wilderson 10 — Frank B. Wilderson III, Associated Professor of African American Studies and Drama at the University of California-Irvine, 2010 (“Introduction: Unspeakable Ethics,” *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Published by Duke University Press, ISBN 9780822347019, p. 1-7)

When I was a young student at Columbia University in New York there was a Black woman who used to stand outside the gate and yell at Whites, Latinos, and East and South Asian students, staff, and faculty as they entered the university. She accused them of having stolen her sofa and of selling her into slavery. She always winked at the Blacks, though we didn't wink back. Some of us thought her outbursts bigoted and out of step with the burgeoning ethos of multiculturalism and "rainbow coalitions.” But others did not wink back because we were too fearful of the possibility that her isolation would become our isolation, and we had come to Columbia for the precise, though largely assumed and unspoken, purpose of foreclosing on that peril. Besides, people said she was crazy. Later when I attended the University of California at Berkeley, I saw a Native American man sitting on the sidewalk of Telegraph Avenue. On the ground in front of him was an upside-down hat and a sign informing pedestrians that here they could settle the "Land Lease Accounts" that they had neglected to settle all of their lives. He, too, was “crazy.” [end page 1]

Leaving aside for the moment their state of mind, it would seem that the structure, that is to say the rebar, or better still the grammar of their demands—and, by extension, the grammar of their suffering—was indeed an ethical grammar. Perhaps it is the only ethical grammar available to modern politics and modernity writ large, for it draws our attention not to how space and time are used and abused by enfranchised and violently powerful interests, but to the violence that underwrites the modern world's capacity to think, act, and exist spatially and temporally. The violence that robbed her of her body and him of his land provided the stage on which other violent and consensual dramas could be enacted. Thus, they would have to be crazy, crazy enough to call not merely the actions of the world but the world itself to account, and to account for them no less! The woman at Columbia was not demanding to be a participant in an unethical network of distribution: she was not demanding a place within capital, a piece of the pie (the demand for her sofa notwithstanding). Rather, she was articulating a triangulation between two things. On the one hand was the loss of her body, the very dereliction of her corporeal integrity, what Hortense Spillers charts as the transition from being a being to becoming a “being for the captor,”1 the drama of value (the stage on which surplus value is extracted from labor power through commodity production and sale). On the other was the corporeal integrity that, once ripped from her body, fortified and extended the corporeal integrity of everyone else on the street. She gave birth to the commodity and to the Human, yet she had neither subjectivity nor a sofa to show for it. In her eyes, the world—not its myriad discriminatory practices, but the world itself—was unethical. And yet, the world passes by her without the slightest inclination to stop and disabuse her of her claim. Instead, it calls her "crazy.” And to what does the world attribute the Native American man's insanity? "He’s crazy if he thinks he's getting any money out of us"? Surely, that doesn't make him crazy. Rather it is simply an indication that he does not have a big enough gun.

What are we to make of a world that responds to the most lucid enunciation of ethics with violence? What are the foundational questions of the ethico-political? Why are these questions so scandalous that they are rarely posed politically, intellectually, and cinematically—unless they are posed obliquely and unconsciously, as if by accident? Give Turtle Island back to the "Savage.” Give life itself back to the Slave. Two simple sentences, [end page 2] fourteen simple words, and the structure of U.S. (and perhaps global) antagonisms would be dismantled. An "ethical modernity" would no longer sound like an oxymoron. From there we could busy ourselves with important conflicts that have been promoted to the level of antagonisms, such as class struggle, gender conflict, and immigrants' rights.

One cannot but wonder why questions that go to the heart of the ethico-political, questions of political ontology, are so unspeakable in intellectual meditations, political broadsides, and even socially and politically engaged feature films. Clearly they can be spoken, even a child could speak those lines, so they would pose no problem for a scholar, an activist, or a filmmaker. And yet, what is also clear—if the filmographies of socially and politically engaged directors, the archive of progressive scholars, and the plethora of left-wing broadsides are anything to go by—is that what can so easily be spoken is now (500 years and 250 million Settlers/Masters on) so ubiquitously unspoken that these two simple sentences, these fourteen words not only render their speaker "crazy" but become themselves impossible to imagine.

Soon it will be forty years since radical politics, left-leaning scholarship, and socially engaged feature films began to speak the unspeakable.2 In the 1960s and early 1970s the questions asked by radical politics and scholarship were not Should the United States be overthrown? or even Would it be overthrown? but when and how—and, for some, what would come in its wake. Those steadfast in their conviction that there remained a discernible quantum of ethics in the United States writ large (and here I am speaking of everyone from Martin Luther King Jr. prior to his 1968 shift, to the Tom Hayden wing of Students for Democratic Society, to the Julian Bond and Marion Barry faction of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to Bobby Kennedy Democrats) were accountable, in their rhetorical machinations, to the paradigmatic zeitgeist of the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement, and the Weather Underground. Radicals and progressives could deride, reject, or chastise armed struggle mercilessly and cavalierly with respect to tactics and the possibility of “success,” but they could not dismiss revolution-as-ethic because they could not make a convincing case—by way of a paradigmatic analysis—that the United States was an ethical formation and still hope to maintain credibility as radicals and progressives. Even Bobby Kennedy (as a U.S. attorney general) mused that the law and its enforcers had no [end page 3] ethical standing in the presence of Blacks.3 One could (and many did) acknowledge America's strength and power. This seldom rose to the level of an ethical assessment, however, remaining instead an assessment of the “balance of forces.” The political discourse of Blacks, and to a lesser extent Indians, circulated too widely to wed the United States and ethics credibly. The raw force of COINTELPRO put an end to this trajectory toward a possible hegemony of ethical accountability. Consequently, the power of Blackness and Redness to pose the question—and the power to pose the question is the greatest power of all—retreated as did White radicals and progressives who "retired" from the struggle. The question lies buried in the graves of young Black Panthers, AIM warriors, and Black Liberation Army soldiers, or in prison cells where so many of them have been rotting (some in solitary confinement) for ten, twenty, or thirty years, and at the gates of the academy where the “crazies” shout at passersby. Gone are not only the young and vibrant voices that effected a seismic shift on the political landscape, but also the intellectual protocols of inquiry, and with them a spate of feature films that became authorized, if not by an unabashed revolutionary polemic, then certainly by a revolutionary zeitgeist.

Is it still possible for a dream of unfettered ethics, a dream of the Settlement and the Slave estate's4 destruction, to manifest itself at the ethical core of cinematic discourse when this dream is no longer a constituent element of political discourse in the streets or of intellectual discourse in the academy? The answer is "no" in the sense that, as history has shown, what cannot be articulated as political discourse in the streets is doubly foreclosed on in screenplays and in scholarly prose, but "yes" in the sense that in even the most taciturn historical moments, such as ours, the grammar of Black and Red suffering breaks in on this foreclosure, albeit like the somatic compliance of hysterical symptoms—it registers in both cinema and scholarship as a symptom of awareness of the structural antagonisms. The election of President Barack Obama does not mitigate the claim that this is a taciturn historical moment. Neoliberalism with a Black face is neither the index of a revolutionary advance nor the end of anti-Blackness as a constituent element of U.S. antagonisms. If anything, the election of Obama enables a plethora of shaming discourses in response to revolutionary politics and "legitimates" widespread disavowal of any notion that the United States itself, and not merely its policies and [end page 4] practices, is unethical. Between 1967 and 1980, we could think cinematically and intellectually of Blackness and Redness as having the coherence of full-blown discourses. From 1980 to the present, however, Blackness and Redness manifest only in the rebar of cinematic and intellectual (political) discourse, that is, as unspoken grammars.

This grammar can be discerned in the cinematic strategies (lighting, camera angles, image composition, and acoustic design), even when the script labors for the spectator to imagine social turmoil through the rubric of conflict (i.e., a rubric of problems that can be posed and conceptually solved) as opposed to the rubric of antagonism (an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions). In other words, even when films narrate a story in which Blacks or lndians are beleaguered with problems that the script insists are conceptually coherent (usually having to do with poverty or the absence of "family values"), the nonnarrative, or cinematic, strategies of the film often disrupt this coherence by posing the irreconcilable questions of Red and Black political ontology—or nonontology. The grammar of antagonism breaks in on the mendacity of conflict.

Semiotics and linguistics teach us that when we speak, our grammar goes unspoken. Our grammar is assumed. It is the structure through which the labor of speech is possible.5 Likewise, the grammar of political ethics—the grammar of assumptions regarding the ontology of suffering—which underwrites film theory and political discourse (in this book, discourse elaborated in direct relation to radical action), and which underwrites cinematic speech (in this book, Red, White, and Black films from the mid-1960s to the present) is also unspoken. This notwithstanding, film theory, political discourse, and cinema assume an ontological grammar, a structure of suffering. And this structure of suffering crowds out others, regardless of the sentiment of the film or the spirit of unity mobilized by the political discourse in question. To put a finer point on it, structures of ontological suffering stand in antagonistic, rather then conflictual, relation to one another (despite the fact that antagonists themselves may not be aware of the ontological position from which they speak). Though this is perhaps the most controversial and out-of-step claim of this book, it is, nonetheless, the foundation of the close reading of feature films and political theory that follows. [end page 5]

The difficulty of writing a book which seeks to uncover Red, Black, and White socially engaged feature films as aesthetic accompaniments to grammars of suffering, predicated on the subject positions of the "Savage" and the Slave, is that today's intellectual protocols are not informed by Fanon's insistence that “ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man.”6 In sharp contrast to the late 1960s and early 1970s, we now live in a political, academic, and cinematic milieu which stresses “diversity,” unity,” “civic participation,” “hybridity,” “access,” and “contribution.” The radical fringe of political discourse amounts to little more than a passionate dream of civic reform and social stability. The distance between the protester and the police has narrowed considerably. The effect of this on the academy is that intellectual protocols tend to privilege two of the three domains of subjectivity, namely preconscious interests (as evidenced in the work of social science around “political unity,” “social attitudes,” “civic participation,” and “diversity,”) and unconscious identification (as evidenced in the humanities' postmodern regimes of “diversity,” “hybridity,” and “relative [rather than “master”] narratives”). Since the 1980s, intellectual protocols aligned with structural positionality (except in the work of die-hard Marxists) have been kicked to the curb. That is to say, it is hardly fashionable anymore to think the vagaries of power through the generic positions within a structure of power relations—such as man/woman, worker/boss. Instead, the academy's ensembles of questions are fixated on specific and “unique” experiences of the myriad identities that make up those structural positions. This would be fine if the work led us back to a critique of the paradigm; but most of it does not. Again, the upshot of this is that the intellectual protocols now in play, and the composite effect of cinematic and political discourse since the 1980s, tend to hide rather than make explicit the grammar of suffering which underwrites the United States and its foundational antagonisms. This state of affairs exacerbates—or, more precisely, mystifies and veils—the ontological death of the Slave and the “Savage” because (as in the 1950s) the cinematic, political, and intellectual discourse of the current milieu resists being sanctioned and authorized by the irreconcilable demands of Indigenism and Blackness—academic enquiry is thus no more effective in pursuing a revolutionary critique than the legislative antics of the loyal opposition. This is how left-leaning scholars help civil [end page 6] society recuperate and maintain stability. But this stability is a state of emergency for Indians and Blacks.

#### Second, anti-Blackness is a fundamental antagonism. The black body is *always already* a victim of social death. Black emancipation is impossible within the state and civil society.

Wilderson 10 — Frank B. Wilderson III, Associated Professor of African American Studies and Drama at the University of California-Irvine, 2010 (“Introduction: Unspeakable Ethics,” *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Published by Duke University Press, ISBN 9780822347019, p. 7-11)

The aim of this book is to embark on a paradigmatic analysis of how dispossession is imagined at the intersection of (a) the most unflinching meditations (metacommentaries) on political economy and libidinal economy, (e.g., Marxism, as in the work of Antonio Negri, and psychoanalysis, as in the work of Kaja Silverman), (b) the discourse of political common sense, and (c) the narrative and formal strategies of socially or politically engaged films. In other words, a paradigmatic analysis asks, What are the constituent elements of, and the assumptive logic regarding, dispossession which underwrite theoretical claims about political and libidinal economy; and how are those elements and assumptions manifest in both political common sense and in political cinema?

Charles S. Maier argues that a metacommentary on political economy can be thought of as an “interrogation of economic doctrines to disclose their sociological and political premises. … in sum, [it] regards economic ideas and behavior not as frameworks for analysis, but as beliefs and actions that must themselves be explained.”7

Jared Sexton describes libidinal economy as “the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious.” Needless to say, libidinal economy functions variously across scales and is as “objective” as political economy. It is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption. Sexton emphasizes that it is “the whole structure of psychic and emotional life,” something more than, but inclusive of or traversed by, what Antonio Gramsci and other Marxists call a “structure of feeling”; it is “a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias capable of both great mobility and tenacious fixation.”8

This book interrogates the assumptive logic of metacommentaries on political and libidinal economy, and their articulations in film, through a subject whose structure of dispossession (the constituent elements of his or her loss and suffering) they cannot theorize: the Black, a subject who is always already positioned as Slave. The implications of my interrogation reach far beyond film studies, for these metacommentaries not only have the status of paradigmatic analyses, but their reasoning and assumptions [end page 7] permeate the private and quotidian of political common sense and buttress organizing and activism on the left.

In leftist metacommentaries on ontology (and in the political common sense and the radical cinema in fee, however unintentionally, to such metacommentaries), subjects' paradigmatic location, the structure of their relationality, is organized around their capacities: powers subjects have or lack, the constituent elements of subjects' structural position with which they are imbued or lack prior to the subjects' performance. Just as prior to a game of chess, the board and the pieces on it live in a network of antagonisms. The spatial and temporal capacities of the queen (where she is located and where she can move, as well as how she can move) articulate an irreconcilable asymmetry of power between her and a rook or a pawn for example. Vest the rook with the powers of the queen (before the game begins, of course) and it is not the outcome of the game that is in jeopardy so much as the integrity of the paradigm itself—it is no longer chess but something else. And it goes without saying that no piece may leave the board if it is to stand in any relation whatsoever to its contemporaries (asymmetry aside); this would be tantamount to leaving the world, to death. Power relations are extant in the sinews of capacity. For Marxists, the revolutionary objective is not to play the game but to destroy it, to end exploitation and alienation. They see the capacity to accumulate surplus value embodied in one piece, the capitalist, and the embodiment of dispossession as being manifest in the worker. But the worker's essential incapacity (powers which cannot accrue to the worker, suffering as exploitation and alienation) is the essence of capacity, life itself, when looked at through the eyes of the Slave.

Socially or politically engaged films pride themselves on their proclivity to embrace what the Left views as the essence of dispossession: the plight of the exploited and alienated worker. Throughout this book, I argue that as radical and iconoclastic as so many socially or politically engaged films are (and they are indeed a breath of fresh air compared to standard Hollywood fare), in their putative embrace of working-class incapacity there is also, from the standpoint of the Slave, a devastating embrace of Human capacity—that which the Slave lacks. In other words, the narrative strategies of films that articulate the suffering of the worker are shot through with obstinate refusals to surrender their cinematic [end page 8] embrace to the structure of the Slave’s domination, something infinitely more severe than exploitation and alienation.

I have little interest in assailing political conservatives. Nor is my argument wedded to the disciplinary needs of political science, or even sociology, where injury must be established, first, as White supremacist event, from which one then embarks on a demonstration of intent, or racism; and, if one is lucky, or foolish, enough, a solution is proposed. If the position of the Black is, as I argue, a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western Hemisphere, indeed, in the world, in other words, if a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject, as imagined by Marxism and psychoanalysis, then his or her paradigmatic exile is not simply a function of repressive practices on the part of institutions (as political science and sociology would have it). This banishment from the Human fold is to be found most profoundly in the emancipatory meditations of Black people's staunchest “allies” and in some of the most “radical” films. Here—not in restrictive policy, unjust legislation, police brutality, or conservative scholarship—is where the Settler/Master's sinews are most resilient.

The polemic animating this research stems from (1) my reading of Native and Black American metacommentaries on Indian and Black subject positions written over the past twenty-three years and (2) a sense of how much that work appears out of joint with intellectual protocols and political ethics which underwrite political praxis and socially engaged popular cinema in this epoch of multiculturalism and globalization. The sense of abandonment I experience when I read the metacommentaries on Red positionality (by theorists such as Leslie Silko, Ward Churchill, Taiaiake Alfred, Vine Deloria Jr., and Haunani-Kay Trask) and the metacommentaries on Black positionality (by theorists such as David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman, Ronald Judy, Hortense Spillers, Orlando Patterson, and Achille Mbembe) against the deluge of multicultural positivity is overwhelming. One suddenly realizes that, though the semantic field on which subjectivity is imagined has expanded phenomenally through the protocols of multiculturalism and globalization theory, Blackness and an unflinching articulation of Redness are more unimaginable and illegible within this expanded semantic field than they were during the height of the FBI’s repressive Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). On the semantic field on which the new protocols are possible, Indigenism can indeed [end page 9] become partially legible through a programmatics of structural adjustment (as fits our globalized era). In other words, for the Indians' subject position to be legible, their positive registers of lost or threatened cultural identity must be foregrounded, when in point of fact the antagonistic register of dispossession that Indians “possess” is a position in relation to a socius structured by genocide. As Churchill points out, everyone from Armenians to Jews have been subjected to genocide, but the Indigenous position is one for which genocide is a constitutive element, not merely an historical event, without which Indians would not, paradoxically, “exist.”

Regarding the Black position, some might ask why, after claims successfully made on the state by the Civil Rights Movement, do I insist on positing an operational analytic for cinema, film studies, and political theory that appears to be a dichotomous and essentialist pairing of Masters and Slaves? In other words, why should we think of today's Blacks in the United States as Slaves and everyone else (with the exception of Indians) as Masters? One could answer these questions by demonstrating how nothing remotely approaching claims successfully made on the state has come to pass. In other words, the election of a Black president aside, police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away en masse at the polls still constitute the lived experience of Black life. But such empirically based rejoinders would lead us in the wrong direction; we would find ourselves on “solid” ground, which would only mystify, rather than clarify, the question. We would be forced to appeal to “facts,” the “historical record,” and empirical markers of stasis and change, all of which could be turned on their head with more of the same. Underlying such a downward spiral into sociology, political science, history, and public policy debates would be the very rubric that I am calling into question: the grammar of suffering known as exploitation and alienation, the assumptive logic whereby subjective dispossession is arrived at in the calculations between those who sell labor power and those who acquire it. The Black qua the worker. Orlando Patterson has already dispelled this faulty ontological grammar in Slavery and Social Death, where he demonstrates how and why work, or forced labor is not a constituent element of slavery. Once the “solid” plank of “work” is removed from slavery, then the conceptually coherent notion of “claims [end page 10] against the state”—the proposition that the state and civil society are elastic enough to even contemplate the possibility of an emancipatory project for the Black position—disintegrates into thin air. The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage. Put another way, No slave, no world. And, in addition, as Patterson argues, no slave is *in* the world.

If, as an ontological position, that is, as a grammar of suffering, the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity; if the Slave is, to borrow from Patterson, generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure, that is, having no relations that need be recognized, a being outside of relationality, then our analysis cannot be approached through the rubric of gains or reversals in struggles with the state and civil society, not unless and until the interlocutor first explains how the Slave is of the world. The onus is not on one who posits the Master/Slave dichotomy but on the one who argues there is a distinction between Slaveness and Blackness. How, when, and where did such a split occur? The woman at the gates of Columbia University awaits an answer.

#### Third, there is no space in politics for Black agency. Progress in *specific areas* does not change the fundamental antagonism of anti-Blackness and the gratuitous violence that it sanctions.

Wilderson 10 — Frank B. Wilderson III, Associated Professor of African American Studies and Drama at the University of California-Irvine, 2010 (“Cinematic Unrest: *Bush Mama* and the Black Liberation Army,” *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Published by Duke University Press, ISBN 9780822347019, p. 141-142)

As sites of political struggle and loci of philosophical meditation, cultural capacity, civil society, and political agency give rise to maps and chronologies of loss and to dreams of restoration and redemption. The Marxist, postcolonial, ecological, and feminist narratives of loss followed by restoration and redemption are predicated on exploitation and alienation as the twin constitutive elements of an essential grammar of suffering. They are political narratives predicated on stories which they have the capacity to tell—and this is key—regarding the coherent ethics of their time and space dilemmas.

The Slave needs freedom not from the wage relation, nor sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy, nor freedom in the form of land restoration. These are part and parcel of the diverse list of contingent freedoms of the “multitudes.”36 The Slave needs freedom from the Human race, freedom from the world. The Slave requires gratuitous freedom. Only gratuitous freedom can repair the object status of his or her flesh, which itself is the product of accumulation's and fungibility's gratuitous violence. But what does the Slave's desire for gratuitous freedom mean for the Human's desire for contingent freedom? This difference between contingent freedom and gratuitous freedom brings us to Bush Mama and the specter of the BIA, to the irreconcilable imbroglio of the Black as a social and political being and the Human as a social and political being—what Jalil Muntaquim termed, a bit too generously, as “a major contradiction… between the Black underground and…Euro-American [revolutionary] forces.”37 The inability of the Human’s political discourses to think gratuitous freedom is less indicative of a “contradiction” than of how anti-Blackness subsidizes Human survival in all its diversity.

Given this state of affairs, the only way the Black can be imagined as an agent of politics is when she or he is crowded out of politics. Politics, for the Black, has as its prerequisite some discursive move which replaces [end page 141] the Black void with a positive, Human, value. Thus, if the Black is to be politically within the world, rather than against the world, she or he only reflects on politics as an ontologist, pontificates about politics as a pundit, or gestures politically as an activist or revolutionary, to the extent that she or he is willing to be structurally adjusted. Since exploitation and alienation's grammar of suffering has crowded out the grammar of suffering of accumulation and fungibility—whipped a police action on it—the Black can only meditate, speak about, or act politically as a worker, as a postcolonial, or as a gay or female subject—but not as a Black object.

One might perform an "anthropology of sentiment" on the Black and write “ontological” meditations, political discourse, or agitate politically, based on how often the Black feels like a man, feels like a women, feels like a gendered subject, feels like a worker, or feels like a postcolonial, and those feelings are important, but they are not essential at the level of ontology. They cannot address the gratuitous violence which structures what is essential to Blackness and suffering, and they are imaginatively constrained in their will: they cannot imagine the kind of violence the Black must harness to break that structure. There is nothing in those Black sentiments powerful enough to alter the structure of the Black's seven-hundred-year-long relation to the world, the relation between one accumulated and fungible thing and a diverse plethora of exploited and alienated Human beings. In other words, there are no feelings powerful enough to alter the structural relation between the living and the dead, not if feelings are pressed into the service of a project which seeks to bring the dead to life. But one can imagine feelings powerful enough to bring the living to death. Whenever Black people walk into a room, spines tingle with such imagination. Will they insist on a politics predicated on their grammar of suffering or will they give us a break and talk about exploitation and alienation? Will they pretend to join the living or will they make us join the dead? The work of exploitation and alienation labors to make politics both possible and impossible. It is a two-pronged labor: it must both animate the political capacity of the Human being and police the political capacity of the Black.

#### Finally, anti-Blackness is ontological, not experiential. The Middle Passage created Blackness as an ontological category. Humanity’s political ontology relies on the foundation of Black social death.

Wilderson 10 — Frank B. Wilderson III, Associated Professor of African American Studies and Drama at the University of California-Irvine, 2010 (“Introduction: Unspeakable Ethics,” *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Published by Duke University Press, ISBN 9780822347019, p. 17-23)

During the emergence of new ontological relations in the modern world, from the late Middle Ages through the 1500s, many different kinds of people experienced slavery. In other words, there have been times when natal alienation, general dishonor, and gratuitous violence have turned [end page 17] individuals of myriad ethnicities and races into beings who are socially dead. But African, or more precisely Blackness, refers to an individual who is by definition always already void of relationality. Thus modernity marks the emergence of a new ontology because it is an era in which an entire race appears, people who, a priori, that is prior to the contingency of the "transgressive act" (such as losing a war or being convicted of a crime), stand as socially dead in relation to the rest of the world. This, I will argue, is as true for those who were herded onto the slave ships as it is for those who had no knowledge whatsoever of the coffles. In this period, chattel slavery, as a condition of ontology and not just as an event of experience, stuck to the African like Velcro. To the extent that we can think the essence of Whiteness and the essence of Blackness, we must think their essences through the structure of the Master/Slave relation. It should be clear by now that I am not only drawing a distinction between what is commonly thought of as the Master/Slave relation and the constituent elements of the Master/Slave relation,26 but I am also drawing a distinction between the experience of slavery (which anyone can be subjected to) and the ontology of slavery, which in modernity (the years 1300 to the present) becomes the singular purview of the Black. In this period, slavery is cathedralized. It “advances” from a word which describes a condition that anyone can be subjected to, to a word which reconfigures the African body into Black flesh. Far from being merely the experience of the African, slavery is now the African's access to (or, more correctly, banishment from) ontology.

In their own ways, Spillers, a Black woman and cultural historian, and Eltis, a White historian of the transatlantic slave trade, make the similar points. First, they claim that the pre-Columbian period, or the late Middle Ages (1300-1500), was a moment in which Europe, the Arab world, and Asia found themselves at an ontological crossroads in society's ability to meditate on its own existence. Second, Spillers and Eltis ask whether the poor, convicts, vagrants, and beggars of any given society (French, German, Dutch, Arab, East Asian) should be condemned to a life of natal alienation. Should they have social death forced on them in lieu of real death (i.e., executions)? Should this form of chattel slavery be imposed on the internal poor, en masse—that is, should the scale of White slavery (to the extent that any one nation carried it out at all) become industrial? [end page 18] And, most important, should the progeny of the White slave be enslaved as well?

It took some time for this argument to unfold. Eltis suggests the argument ensued—depending on the country—from 1200 to the mid-1400s (1413-23), and that, whereas it was easily and forthrightly settled in places like England and the Netherlands, in other countries like Portugal, parts of southern France, and parts of the Arab world, the question waxed and waned.

Again, what is important for us to glean from these historians is that the pre-Columbian period, the late Middle Ages, reveals no archive of debate on these three questions as they might be related to that massive group of black-skinned people south of the Sahara. Eltis suggests that there was indeed massive debate which ultimately led to Britain taking the lead in the abolition of slavery, but he reminds us that that debate did not have its roots in the late Middle Ages, the post-Columbian period of the 1500s or the Virginia colony period of the 1600s. It was, he asserts, an outgrowth of the mid- to late eighteenth-century emancipatory thrust—intra-Human disputes such as the French and American revolutions—that swept through Europe. But Eltis does not take his analysis further than this. Therefore, it is important that we not be swayed by his optimism about the Enlightenment and its subsequent abolitionist discourses. It is highly conceivable that the discourse that elaborates the justification for freeing the slave is not the product of the Human being having suddenly and miraculously recognized the slave. Rather, as Saidiya Hartman argues, emancipatory discourses present themselves to us as further evidence of the Slave's fungibility: "The figurative capacities of blackness enable white flights of fancy while increasing the likelihood of the captive's disappearance.”27 First, the questions of Humanism were elaborated in contradistinction to the human void, to the African qua chattel (the 1200s to the end of the 1600s). Second, as the presence of Black chattel in the midst of exploited and unexploited Humans (workers and bosses, respectively) became a fact of the world, exploited Humans (in the throes of class conflict with unexploited Humans) seized the image of the Slave as an enabling vehicle that animated the evolving discourses of their own emancipation, just as unexploited Humans had seized the flesh of the Slave to increase their profits. [end page 19]

Without this gratuitous violence, a violence that marks everyone experientially until the late Middle Ages when it starts to mark the Black ontologically, the so-called great emancipatory discourses of modernity—Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, sexual liberation, and the ecology movement—political discourses predicated on grammars of suffering and whose constituent elements are exploitation and alienation, might not have developed.28 Chattel slavery did not simply reterritorialize the ontology of the African. It also created the Human out of culturally disparate entities from Europe to the East.

I am not suggesting that across the globe Humanism developed in the same way regardless of region or culture; what I am saying is that the late Middle Ages gave rise to an ontological category—an ensemble of common existential concerns—which made and continues to make possible both war and peace, conflict and resolution, between the disparate members of the human race, East and West. Senator Thomas Hart Benton intuited this notion of the existential commons when he wrote that though the "Yellow race" and its culture had been "torpid and stationary for thousands of years . . . [Whites and Asians] must talk together, and trade together, and marry together. Commerce is a great civilizer—social intercourse as great—and marriage greater!”29 Eltis points out that as late as the seventeenth century, "prisoners taken in the course of European military action . . . could expect death if they were leaders, or banishment if they were deemed followers, but never enslavement. . . . Detention followed by prisoner exchanges or ransoming was common.” “By the seventeenth century, enslavement of fellow Europeans was beyond the limits” of Humanism’s existential commons, even in times of war.30 Slave status "was reserved for non-Christians. Even the latter group however . . . had some prospect of release in exchange for Christians held by rulers of Algiers, Tunis, and other Mediterranean Muslim powers.”31 But though the practice of enslaving the vanquished was beyond the limit of wars among Western peoples and only practiced provisionally in East-West conflicts, the baseness of the option was not debated when it came to the African. The race of Humanism (White, Asian, South Asian, and Arab) could not have produced itself without the simultaneous production of that walking destruction which became known as the Black. Put another way, through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent; and [end page 20] with these joys and struggles the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks.

In his essay "To ‘Corroborate Our Claims': Public Positioning and the Slavery Metaphor in Revolutionary America,” Peter Dorsey (in his concurrence with the cultural historians F. Nwabueze Okoye and Patricia Bradley) suggests that in mid- to late eighteenth-century America Blackness was such a fungible commodity that it was traded as freely between the exploited (workers who did not “own” slaves) as it was between the unexploited (planters who did). This was due to the effective uses to which Whites could put the Slave as both flesh and metaphor. For the revolutionaries, “slavery represented a ‘nightmare’ that white Americans were trying to avoid.”32 Dorsey's claim is provocative, but not unsupported: he maintains that had Blacks-as-Slaves not been in the White field of vision on a daily basis that it would have been virtually impossible for Whites to transform themselves from colonial subjects into revolutionaries:

Especially prominent in the rhetoric and reality of the [revolutionary] era, the concepts of freedom and slavery were applied to a wide variety of events and values and were constantly being defined and redefined. ... Early understandings of American freedom were in many ways dependent on the existence of chattel slavery. . . . [We should] see slavery in revolutionary discourse, not merely as a hyperbolic rhetorical device but as a crucial and fluid [fungible] concept that had a major impact on the way early Americans thought about their political future. . . . The slavery metaphor destabilized previously accepted categories of thought about politics, race, and the early republic.33

Though the idea of "taxation without representation" may have spoken concretely to the idiom of power that marked the British/American relation as being structurally unethical, it did not provide metaphors powerful and fungible enough for Whites to meditate and move on when resisting the structure of their own subordination at the hands of "unchecked political power.”34

The most salient feature of Dorsey's findings is not his understanding of the way Blackness, as a crucial and fungible conceptual possession of civil society, impacts and destabilizes previously accepted categories of intra-White thought. Most important, instead, is his contribution to the [end page 21] evidence that, even when Blackness is deployed to stretch the elasticity of civil society to the point of civil war, that expansion is never elastic enough to embrace the very Black who catalyzed the expansion. In fact, Dorsey, building on Bradley's historical research, asserts that just the opposite is true. The more the political imagination of civil society is enabled by the fungibility of the slave metaphor, the less legible the condition of the slave becomes: “Focusing primarily on colonial newspapers . . . Bradley finds that the slavery metaphor ‘served to distance the patriot agenda from the antislavery movement.’ If anything, Bradley states, widespread use of the metaphor gave first evidence that the issue of real slavery was not to haye a part in the revolutionary messages.’”35 And Eltis believes that this philosophical incongruity between the image of the slave and freedom for the slave begins in Europe and predates the American Revolution by at least one hundred years: "The [European] countries least likely to enslave their own had the harshest and most sophisticated system of exploiting enslaved non-Europeans. Overall, the English and Dutch conception of the role of the individual in metropolitan society ensured the accelerated development of African chattel slavery in the Americas . . . because their own subjects could not become chattel slaves or even convicts for life.”36

Furthermore, the circulation of Blackness as metaphor and image at the most politically volatile and progressive moments in history (e.g., the French, English, and American revolutions) produces dreams of liberation which are more inessential to and more parasitic on the Black, and more emphatic in their guarantee of Black suffering, than any dream of human liberation in any era heretofore.

Black slavery is foundational to modern Humanism’s ontics because "freedom" is the hub of Humanism's infinite conceptual trajectories. But these trajectories only appear to be infinite. They are finite in the sense that they are predicated on the idea of freedom from some contingency that can be named, or at least conceptualized. The contingent rider could be freedom from patriarchy, freedom from economic exploitation, freedom from political tyranny (e.g., taxation without representation), freedom from heteronormativity, and so on. What I am suggesting is that first political discourse recognizes freedom as a structuring ontologic and then it works to disavow this recognition by imagining freedom not through political ontology—where it rightfully began—but through political experience (and practice); whereupon it immediately loses its ontological [end page 22] foundations. Why would anyone do this? Why would anyone start off with, quite literally, an earth-shattering ontologic and, in the process of meditating on it and acting through it, reduce it to an earth-reforming experience? Why do Humans take such pride in self-adjustment, in diminishing, rather than intensifying, the project of liberation (how did we get from 1968 to the present)? Because, I contend, in allowing the notion of freedom to attain the ethical purity of its ontological status, one would have to lose one's Human coordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die.

For the Black, freedom is an ontological, rather than experiential, question. There is no philosophically credible way to attach an experiential, a contingent, rider onto the notion of freedom when one considers the Black—such as freedom from gender or economic oppression, the kind of contingent riders rightfully placed on the non-Black when thinking freedom. Rather, the riders that one could place on Black freedom would be hyperbolic—though no less true—and ultimately untenable: freedom from the world, freedom from Humanity, freedom from everyone (including one's Black self). Given the reigning episteme, what are the chances of elaborating a comprehensive, much less translatable and communicable, political project out of the necessity of freedom as an absolute? Gratuitous freedom has never been a trajectory of Humanist thought, which is why the infinite trajectories of freedom that emanate from Humanism's hub are anything but infinite—for they have no line of flight leading to the Slave.

### 1NC

#### 1. Ontological Fatalism Wrong — anti-blackness *isn’t* a structural antagonism.

Hudson 13 — Peter Hudson, Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2013 (“The state and the colonial unconscious,” *Social Dynamics*, Volume 39, Number 2, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Taylor & Francis Online, p. 265-266)

Colonialism, anxiety and emancipation3

Thus the self-same/other distinction is necessary for the possibility of identity itself. There always has to exist an outside, which is also inside, to the extent it is designated as the impossibility from which the possibility of the existence of the subject derives its rule (Badiou 2009, 220). But although the excluded place which isn’t excluded insofar as it is necessary for the very possibility of inclusion and identity may be universal (may be considered “ontological”), its content (what fills it) – as well as the mode of this filling and its reproduction – are contingent. In other words, the meaning of the signifier of exclusion is not determined once and for all: the place of the place of exclusion, of death is itself over-determined, i.e. the very framework for deciding the other and the same, exclusion and inclusion, is nowhere engraved in ontological stone but is political and never terminally settled. Put differently, the “curvature of intersubjective space” (Critchley 2007, 61) and thus, the specific modes of the “othering” of “otherness” are nowhere decided in advance (as [end page 265] a certain ontological fatalism might have it) (see Wilderson 2008). The social does not have to be divided into white and black, and the meaning of these signifiers is never necessary – because they are signifiers.

To be sure, colonialism institutes an ontological division, in that whites exist in a way barred to blacks – who are not. But this ontological relation is really on the side of the ontic – that is, of all contingently constructed identities, rather than the ontology of the social which refers to the ultimate unfixity, the indeterminacy or lack of the social. In this sense, then, the white man doesn’t exist, the black man doesn’t exist (Fanon 1968, 165); and neither does the colonial symbolic itself, including its most intimate structuring relations – division is constitutive of the social, not the colonial division.

“Whiteness” may well be very deeply sediment in modernity itself, but respect for the “ontological difference” (see Heidegger 1962, 26; Watts 2011, 279) shows up its ontological status as ontic. It may be so deeply sedimented that it becomes difficult even to identify the very possibility of the separation of whiteness from the very possibility of order, but from this it does not follow that the “void” of “black being” functions as the ultimate substance, the transcendental signified on which all possible forms of sociality are said to rest. What gets lost here, then, is the specificity of colonialism, of its constitutive axis, its “ontological” differential.

A crucial feature of the colonial symbolic is that the real is not screened off by the imaginary in the way it is under capitalism. At the place of the colonised, the symbolic and the imaginary give way because non-identity (the real of the social) is immediately inscribed in the “lived experience” (vécu) of the colonised subject. The colonised is “traversing the fantasy” (Zizek 2006a, 40–60) all the time; the void of the verb “to be” is the very content of his interpellation. The colonised is, in other words, the subject of anxiety for whom the symbolic and the imaginary never work, who is left stranded by his very interpellation.4 “Fixed” into “non-fixity,” he is eternally suspended between “element” and “moment”5 – he is where the colonial symbolic falters in the production of meaning and is thus the point of entry of the real into the texture itself of colonialism.

Be this as it may, whiteness and blackness are (sustained by) determinate and contingent practices of signification; the “structuring relation” of colonialism thus itself comprises a knot of significations which, no matter how tight, can always be undone. Anti-colonial – i.e., anti-“white” – modes of struggle are not (just) “psychic”6 but involve the “reactivation” (or “de-sedimentation”)7 of colonial objectivity itself. No matter how sedimented (or global), colonial objectivity is not ontologically immune to antagonism. Differentiality, as Zizek insists (see Zizek 2012, chap- ter 11, 771 n48), immanently entails antagonism in that differentiality both makes possible the existence of any identity whatsoever and at the same time – because it is the presence of one object in another – undermines any identity ever being (fully) itself. Each element in a differential relation is the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of each other. It is this dimension of antagonism that the Master Signifier covers over transforming its outside (Other) into an element of itself, reducing it to a condition of its possibility.8

#### 2. Yes, Racial Progress — incremental reforms have empirically improved Black living and working conditions.

Johnson 16 — Cedric Johnson, Associate Professor of African American Studies and Political Science at the University of Illinois at Chicago, former Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Hobart & William Smith Colleges, former Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African-American Studies at the University of Rochester, holds a Ph.D. in Government and Politics from the University of Maryland-College Park, 2016 (“An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Liberals Who Love Him,” *Jacobin*, February 3rd, Available Online at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/ta-nehisi-coates-case-for-reparations-bernie-sanders-racism/>, Accessed 04-04-2016)

Ta-Nehisi Coates recently criticized the Bernie Sanders campaign for Sanders’s pessimism regarding black reparations for slavery and Jim Crow segregation. When asked during a campaign event whether he would support reparations, Sanders responded with characteristic bluntness, saying that “its likelihood of getting through Congress is nil,” before adding that a push for formal reparations for slavery would be politically divisive.

Instead of reparations, Sanders argued,

what we should be talking about is making massive investments in rebuilding our cities, in creating millions of decent paying jobs, in making public colleges and universities tuition-free, basically targeting our federal resources to the areas where it is needed the most and where it is needed the most is in impoverished communities, often African American and Latino.

Sanders’s plan is part of his long-held political vision that sees a revitalized public sector as a lever to address the needs of the most submerged segments of the population through universal social policy. But Coates was not impressed. As the foremost proponent of reparations in recent memory, he viewed Sanders’s response as a fundamental weakness in the senator’s “political revolution.”

According to Coates, “Sanders’s radicalism has failed in the ancient fight against white supremacy.” Moreover, Coates contended that Sanders’s class-based remedy is rooted in “the myth that racism and socialism are necessarily incompatible,” and argued that

raising the minimum wage doesn’t really address the fact that black men without criminal records have about the same shot at low-wage work as white men with them; nor can making college free address the wage gap between black and white graduates. Housing discrimination, historical and present, may well be the fulcrum of white supremacy. Affirmative action is one of the most disputed issues of the day. Neither are addressed in the “racial justice” section of Sanders [sic] platform.

In a follow-up to his initial criticism of Sanders, Coates highlighted the limits of social democracy in achieving racial justice in Europe. “There is no need to be theoretical about this,” he declared.

Across Europe, the kind of robust welfare states Sanders supports — higher minimum wage, single payer health care, low-cost higher education — has been embraced. Have these polices vanquished racism? Or has race become another rubric for asserting who should benefit from the state’s largesse and who should not? And if class-based policy alone is insufficient to banish racism in Europe, why would it prove to be sufficient in a country founded on white supremacy?

We actually do need to be theoretical about this. Coates’s sweeping mischaracterization diminishes the actual impact that social-democratic and socialist governments have historically had in improving the labor conditions and daily lives of working people, in Europe, the United States, and for a time, across parts of the Third World.

Coates also ignores the legions of blacks who have fought for generations to advance egalitarian state interventions — in the US and abroad — and seems to forget how the neoliberal assault on progressive left politics domestically and globally has worsened living and working conditions across different social layers, creating widespread precarity for the middle and working classes, professionals and low-skilled workers, and immigrants and minorities alike.

Coates’s disagreement with Sanders isn’t new; he riffs on a standing criticism of Sanders, and updates the Cold War, anti-socialist canard that any attempt to build social democracy on US soil will inevitably be hobbled by racism. Sanders faced similar criticisms last summer, when a handful of Black Lives Matter protesters interrupted the Netroots Nation conference and a rally for Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid in Seattle.

But I’ve grown weary of this position — repeated with startling unanimity by students, activists, academic colleagues, social media commentators, and career pundits, who frequently reject any talk of a universal, broad-based leftist project — which fails to hold up against the weight of historical fact.

Arguments concerning the racist limits of left universalism often rest on the historical failures of progressive state policies. Whenever the subject of the New Deal is broached, many, including Coates, are quick to point to the discriminatory Social Security Act, which denied benefits to sharecroppers and domestic laborers and excluded thousands of black workers.

The New Deal was certainly flawed. It reflected the balance of class forces during the 1930s and was a combination of policies that favored particular capitalist blocs and other more progressive measures that resulted from worker and popular movement demands to constrain the market.

But the tendency to focus on the limitations of the Social Security provisions overlooks the broader, diverse policies that made up this social-democratic project — programs that directly benefitted the black unemployed like the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and during the Second World War, the executive order to desegregate the defense industry.

These efforts were not perfect, and although blacks were employed across the nation through state-funded and state-directed public works projects, the CCC camps were racially segregated. The racial and gender integration of the shipyards and munitions factories was also short-lived, with peacetime demobilization marked by a return to previous patterns of exclusion and segmentation in various industries, as returning veterans reentered the domestic workforce.

Yet each of these measures demonstrated the possibility of an integrated society, and the power of the public sector in providing direct, concrete benefits to African Americans against the private discrimination of the market.

Indeed, towering mid-twentieth-century liberal and radical left intellectuals and activists such as A. Philip Randolph, John P. Davis, Esther Cooper Jackson, John Jackson, Bayard Rustin, and scores of others would have found themselves quite at odds with Coates’s liberal antiracist viewpoint that working-class-centered, anticapitalist political projects are patently inadequate for addressing the concerns of black voters.

The claim that social democracy and socialism are always and everywhere at odds with racial progress is simply false. It is not supported by the actual history of progressive struggles and the substantive ways they transformed black life.

Ultimately, Coates’s views about class and race — and this nation’s complex and tortured historical development — are well-meaning and at times poetic, but wrongheaded. The reparations argument is rooted in black nationalist politics, which traditionally elides class and neglects the way that race-first politics are often the means for advancing discrete, bourgeois class interests.

In its present incarnation, the reparations argument is better understood as a more reactionary, civil society version of the “rising tide lifts all boats” sensibility — a sensibility that Coates rejects. This version of race uplift supposes a black businessman who competes for government contracts and keeps a summer home and a single mother of three who relies on the Section 8 voucher program and itinerant minimum-wage employment to make ends meet share the same political interests by virtue of their common heritage and the experience of living in a racist society.

Most of all, Coates is wrong about how we have achieved black political and social progress in the past, and what we should do going forward. From the antebellum anti-slavery struggles to the postwar southern desegregation campaigns to contemporary battles against austerity, interracialism and popular social struggle have been central to improving the civic and material circumstances of African Americans, and at the level of daily life, such movements have confronted racist habits and perceptions, sweeping aside old boundaries to create new notions of communion and solidarity.

#### 3. Fatalism Destroys Agency — racism is *not* structurally inevitable.

Omi and Winant 13 — Michael Omi, Associate Professor in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California-Berkeley, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, and Howard Winant, Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Director of the University of California Center for New Racial Studies, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, 2013 (“Resistance is futile?: a response to Feagin and Elias,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 36, Number 6, September, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Taylor & Francis Online, p. 961-962)

We were at first surprised by the extensive critique of our 1994 book by Joe Feagin and Sean Elias. Although we do not know Elias, we have great respect and friendship for Joe Feagin and have learned from his insightful work on race and racism over the years. We have shared conference panels with him and endorsed his books (and he ours). In 2009, we published a somewhat critical but also appreciative review of Feagin’s Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression (Routledge 2006) in Contemporary Sociology (March 2009). Elias subsequently wrote a critical response to our review (September 2009). Maybe this is payback?

After surprise came intrigue and excitement: we realized that this was a great opportunity to examine racial politics, race theory and the dynamics of racism in the USA today. In their criticism of our work, Feagin and Elias have posed numerous crucial issues for that discussion. Let us have that debate.

Their essay has an overly tendentious tone and sometimes misreads and misinterprets our book. Still there are many points of agreement between the racial formation and systemic racism theories. Where we disagree most strongly is over our respective understanding of racial politics. Feagin and Elias focus so intensely on racism that they lose sight of the complexities of race and the variations that exist among and within racially defined groups. In their ‘systemic racism’ account white racist rule is so comprehensive and absolute that the political power and agency of people of colour virtually disappear. Indeed, the ‘white racial frame’ (Feagin 2009) is so omnipotent that white racism seems to usurp and monopolize all political space in the USA. Yes, ‘counter framing’ is present, but it appears marginal at best, unable effectively to challenge the pervasiveness, persistence and power of white racism. Since Feagin and Elias dismiss ideas of ‘racial democracy’ tout court, their perspective makes it difficult to understand [end page 961] how anti-racist mobilization or political reform could ever have occurred in the past or could ever take place in the future. They see racism as so exclusively white that any notion of white anti-racism is virtually ignored and completely unexplained.

Despite Feagin and Elias’s good intentions of linking their analysis to anti-racist practice, we believe their views have quite the opposite effect: without intending to do so, they dismiss the political agency of people of colour and of anti-racist whites. In Feagin/Elias’s view, ‘systemic racism’ is like the Borg in the Star Trek series: a hive-mind phenomenon that assimilates all it touches. As the Borg announce in their collective audio message to intended targets, ‘Resistance is futile’.

### Extend: “Ontological Fatalism Wrong”

#### (a) Wilderson’s psychoanalysis arguments oversimplify and cement the abjection of Blackness.

Marriott 12 — David S. Marriott, Professor in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California-Santa Cruz, holds a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Sussex, 2012 (“Black Cultural Studies,” *The Year’s Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, Volume 20, Issue 1, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Oxford Journals Online, p. 47-49)

For example, in Chapter One (‘The Structure of Antagonisms’), written as a theoretical introduction, and which opens explicitly on the Fanonian question of why ontology cannot understand the being of the Black, Wilderson is prepared to say that black suffering is not only beyond analogy, it also refigures the whole of being: ‘the essence of being for the White and non-Black position’ is non-niggerness, consequently, ‘[b]eing can thus be thought of, in the first ontological instance, as non-niggerness, and slavery then as niggerness’ (p. 37). It is not hard when reading such sentences to suspect a kind of absolutism at work here, and one that manages to be peculiarly and dispiritingly dogmatic: throughout Red, White, and Black, despite variations in tone and emphasis, there is always the desire to have black lived experience named as the worst, and the politics of such a desire inevitably collapses into a kind of sentimental moralism: for the claim that ‘Blackness is incapacity in its most pure and unadulterated form’ means merely that the black has to embody this abjection without reserve (p. 38). This logic—and the denial of any kind of ‘ontological integrity’ [end page 47] to the Black/Slave due to its endless traversal by force does seem to reduce ontology to logic, namely, a logic of non-recuperability—moves through the following points: (1) Black non-being is not capable of symbolic resistance and, as such, falls outside of any language of authenticity or reparation; (2) for such a subject, which Wilderson persists in calling ‘death’, the symbolic remains foreclosed (p. 43); (3) as such, Blackness is the record of an occlusion which remains ever present: ‘White (Human) capacity, in advance of the event of discrimination or oppression, is parasitic on Black incapacity’ (p. 45); (4) and, as an example of the institutions or discourses involving ‘violence’, ‘antagonisms’ and ‘parasitism’, Wilderson describes White (or non-Black) film theory and cultural studies as incapable of understanding the ‘suffering of the Black—the Slave’ (they cannot do so because they are erroneously wedded to humanism and to the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, which Wilderson takes as two examples of what the Afro-pessimist should avoid) (p. 56); as a corrective, Wilderson calls for a new language of abstraction, and one centrally concerned with exposing ‘the structure of antagonisms between Blacks and Humans’ (p. 68). Reading seems to stop here, at a critique of Lacanian full speech: Wilderson wants to say that Lacan’s notion of the originary (imaginary) alienation of the subject is still wedded to relationality as implied by the contrast between ‘empty’ and ‘full’ speech, and so apparently cannot grasp the trauma of ‘absolute Otherness’ that is the Black’s relation to Whites, because psychoanalysis cannot fathom the ‘structural, or absolute, violence’ of Black life (pp. 74; 75). ‘Whereas Lacan was aware of how language ‘‘precedes and exceeds us’’, he did not have Fanon’s awareness of how violence also precedes and exceeds Blacks’ (p. 76). The violence of such abjection—or incapacity—is therefore that it cannot be communicated or avowed, and is always already delimited by desubjectification and dereliction (p. 77). Whence the suspicion of an ontology reduced to a logic (of abjection). Leaving aside the fact that it is quite mistaken to limit Lacan’s notion of full speech to the search for communication (the unconscious cannot be confined to parole), it is clear that, according to Wilderson’s own ‘logic’, his description of the Black is working, via analogy, to Lacan’s notion of the real but, in his insistence on the Black as an absolute outside Wilderson can only duly reify this void at the heart of universality. The Black is ‘beyond the limit of contingency’—but it is worth saying immediately that this ‘beyond’ is indeed a foreclosure that defines a violence whose traces can only be thought violently (that is, analogically), and whose nonbeing returns as the theme for Wilderson’s political thinking of a non-recuperable abjection. The Black is nonbeing and, as such, is more real and primary than being per se: given how much is at stake, this [end page 48] insistence on a racial metaphysics of injury implies a fundamental irreconcilability between Blacks and Humans (there is really no debate to be had here: irreconcilability is the condition and possibility of what it means to be Black).

#### (b) Pessimism doesn’t require fatalism. Wilderson’s alternative locks in oppression.

Marriott 12 — David S. Marriott, Professor in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California-Santa Cruz, holds a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Sussex, 2012 (“Black Cultural Studies,” *The Year’s Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, Volume 20, Issue 1, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Oxford Journals Online, p. 46-47)

2. Race and Visual Culture

The year saw several important publications in the field of black visual culture studies; and all concerned with the post-slave condition of the still and moving image in Europe and the US.

In the concluding pages of Darker Than Blue, Gilroy restates why he finds the ongoing attachment to the idea of race in the US so very unsatisfactory in comparison, say, to the anti-racism of Frantz Fanon:

[Fanon’s] ‘audacious commitment to an alternative conception of humanity reconstituted outside ‘‘race’’ [. . .] is something that does not endear Fanon’s work to today’s practitioners of the facile antihumanism and ethnic absolutism so characteristic of life on US college campuses, where class-based homogeneity combines smoothly with deference to racial and ethic particularity and with resignation to the world as it appears. Fanon disappoints that scholastic constituency by refusing to see culture as an insurmountable obstacle between groups, even if they have been racialized. He does not accept the ‘‘strategic’’ award of an essential innocence to the oppressed and the wretched of the earth. Their past and present sufferings confer no special nobility upon them and are not invested with redemptive insights. Suffering is just suffering, and Fanon has no patience with those who would invoke the armour of incorrigibility around national liberation struggles or minority cultures’. (pp. 157–8, my emphasis)

Whatever one might think of the cogency of these remarks (if only because the notion of a non-racial life is predicated on the idea that the human can somehow reside ‘outside’ of race, a humanism that would always then be constitutively compromised by the racism at its frontier), the question of whether US culture can ever escape racial antagonism is the primary focus of Frank B. Wilderson III’s powerful Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms, as part of a more general reading of US film culture. And indeed Fanon’s anti-philosophical philosophical critique of racial ontology (historically blacks were seen as part of existence but not, as yet, part of human being, a not-yet that forces Fanon to rethink the teleological form of the human as already and essentially violent in its separation from the state of nature from which it has come) forms a major part of [end page 46] Wilderson’s conception of anti-blackness as the major structural antagonism of US history and culture. It is against the conception that racism could ever be simply contingent to black experience that Wilderson protests, reflecting on the fact that racial slavery has no parallel to other forms of suffering, and perhaps most strikingly social death is the constitutive essence of black existence in the US. In brief, slavery remains so originary, in the sense of what he calls its ‘accumulation and fungibility’ (terms borrowed from Saidiya Hartman), it not only has no ‘analogy’ to other forms of antagonism—Wilderson’s examples are the Holocaust and Native American genocide— there is simply no process of getting over it, of recovering from the loss (as wound, or trauma): as such, slavery remains the ultimate structure of antagonism in the US. Whether at a personal level or at the level of historical process, if ‘black slavery is foundational to modern Humanism’, then any teleological appeal to a humanism beyond racism is doomed from the start (p. 22). The problem with Wilderson’s argument, however, is that it remains of a piece with the manichean imperatives that beset it, and which by definition are structurally uppermost, which means that he can only confirm those imperatives as absolutes rather than chart a dialectical path beyond them, insofar as, structurally speaking, there is no ‘outside’ to black social death and alienation, or no outside to this outside, and all that thought can do is mirror its own enslavement by race. This is not so much ‘afro-pessimism’—a term coined by Wilderson—as thought wedded to its own despair. However, this is also not the entire story of Red, White, and Black, as I hope to show.

\* “Manichean imperatives” refers to the need to see things as dualisms; Manichean refers to Manicheanism, a gnostic religion founded by the Iranian prophet Mani

#### (c) Racism is produced by policy, not ontology. Fatalism is wrong.

Bouie 13 — Jamelle Bouie, Staff Writer at *The American Prospect*, 2013 (“Making (and Dismantling) Racism,” *The American Prospect*, March 11th, Available Online at http://prospect.org/article/making-and-dismantling-racism, Accessed 04-04-2014)

Over at The Atlantic, Ta-Nehisi Coates has been exploring the intersection of race and public policy, with a focus on white supremacy as a driving force in political decisions at all levels of government. This has led him to two conclusions: First, that anti-black racism as we understand it is a creation of explicit policy choices—the decision to exclude, marginalize, and stigmatize Africans and their descendants has as much to do with racial prejudice as does any intrinsic tribalism. And second, that it's possible to dismantle this prejudice using public policy. Here is Coates in his own words:

Last night I had the luxury of sitting and talking with the brilliant historian Barbara Fields. One point she makes that very few Americans understand is that racism is a creation. You read Edmund Morgan’s work and actually see racism being inscribed in the law and the country changing as a result.

If we accept that racism is a creation, then we must then accept that it can be destroyed. And if we accept that it can be destroyed, we must then accept that it can be destroyed by us and that it likely must be destroyed by methods kin to creation. Racism was created by policy. It will likely only be ultimately destroyed by policy.

Over at his blog, Andrew Sullivan offers a reply:

I don’t believe the law created racism any more than it can create lust or greed or envy or hatred. It can encourage or mitigate these profound aspects of human psychology – it can create racist structures as in the Jim Crow South or Greater Israel. But it can no more end these things that it can create them. A complementary strategy is finding ways for the targets of such hatred to become inured to them, to let the slurs sting less until they sting not at all. Not easy. But a more manageable goal than TNC’s utopianism.

I can appreciate the point Sullivan is making, but I'm not sure it's relevant to Coates' argument. It is absolutely true that "Group loyalty is deep in our DNA," as Sullivan writes. And if you define racism as an overly aggressive form of group loyalty—basically just prejudice—then Sullivan is right to throw water on the idea that the law can "create racism any more than it can create lust or greed or envy or hatred."

But Coates is making a more precise claim: That there's nothing natural about the black/white divide that has defined American history. White Europeans had contact with black Africans well before the trans-Atlantic slave trade without the emergence of an anti-black racism. It took particular choices made by particular people—in this case, plantation owners in colonial Virginia—to make black skin a stigma, to make the "one drop rule" a defining feature of American life for more than a hundred years. By enslaving African indentured servants and allowing their white counterparts a chance for upward mobility, colonial landowners began the process that would make white supremacy the ideology of America. The position of slavery generated a stigma that then justified continued enslavement—blacks are lowly, therefore we must keep them as slaves.

Slavery (and later, Jim Crow) wasn't built to reflect racism as much as it was built in tandem with it. And later policy, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, further entrenched white supremacist attitudes. Block black people from owning homes, and they're forced to reside in crowded slums. Onlookers then use the reality of slums to deny homeownership to blacks, under the view that they're unfit for suburbs.

In other words, create a prohibition preventing a marginalized group from engaging in socially sanctioned behavior—owning a home, getting married—and then blame them for the adverse consequences. Indeed, in arguing for gay marriage and responding to conservative critics, Sullivan has taken note of this exact dynamic. Here he is twelve years ago, in a column for The New Republic that builds on earlier ideas:

Gay men—not because they're gay but because they are men in an all-male subculture—are almost certainly more sexually active with more partners than most straight men. (Straight men would be far more promiscuous, I think, if they could get away with it the way gay guys can.) Many gay men value this sexual freedom more than the stresses and strains of monogamous marriage (and I don't blame them). But this is not true of all gay men. Many actually yearn for social stability, for anchors for their relationships, for the family support and financial security that come with marriage. To deny this is surely to engage in the "soft bigotry of low expectations." They may be a minority at the moment. But with legal marriage, their numbers would surely grow. And they would function as emblems in gay culture of a sexual life linked to stability and love. [Emphasis added]

What else is this but a variation on Coates' core argument, that society can create stigmas by using law to force particular kinds of behavior? Insofar as gay men were viewed as unusually promiscuous, it almost certainly had something to do with the fact that society refused to recognize their humanity and sanction their relationships. The absence of any institution to mediate love and desire encouraged behavior that led this same culture to say "these people are too degenerate to participate in this institution."

If the prohibition against gay marriage helped create an anti-gay stigma, then lifting it—as we've seen over the last decade—has helped destroy it. There's no reason racism can't work the same way.

\* Ta-Nehisi Coates = National Correspondent at *The Atlantic*

#### (d) Racism is relative, not structural. Policies matter a lot.

Omi and Winant 13 — Michael Omi, Associate Professor in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California-Berkeley, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, and Howard Winant, Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Director of the University of California Center for New Racial Studies, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, 2013 (“Resistance is futile?: a response to Feagin and Elias,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 36, Number 6, September, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Taylor & Francis Online, p. 964-965)

We think that race is so profoundly a lived-in and lived-out part of both social structure and identity that it exceeds and transcends racism — thereby allowing for resistance to racism. Race, therefore, is more than ‘racism’; it is a fully fledged ‘social fact’ like sex/gender or class. From this perspective, race shapes racism as much as racism shapes race. Racial identities (individual and group), and other race-oriented concepts as well, are unstable. They are not uniforms; races are not teams; they are not defined solely by antagonism to one another. They vary internally and ideologically; they overlap and mix; their positions in the social structure shift; in other words they are shaped by political conflict.

In Feagin and Elias’s account, white racist rule in the USA appears unalterable and permanent. There is little sense that the ‘white racial frame’ evoked by systemic racism theory changes in significant ways over historical time. They dismiss important rearrangements and reforms as merely ‘a distraction from more ingrained structural oppressions and deep lying inequalities that continue to define US society’ (Feagin and Elias 2012, p. 21). Feagin and Elias use a concept they call ‘surface flexibility’ to argue that white elites frame racial realities in ways that suggest change, but are merely engineered to reinforce the underlying structure of racial oppression.

Feagin and Elias say the phrase ‘racial democracy’ is an oxymoron — a word defined in the dictionary as a figure of speech that combines contradictory terms. If they mean the USA is a contradictory and incomplete democracy in respect to race and racism issues, we agree. If they mean that people of colour have no democratic rights or political power in the USA, we disagree. The USA is a racially despotic country [end page 964] in many ways, but in our view it is also in many respects a racial democracy, capable of being influenced towards more or less inclusive and redistributive economic policies, social policies, or for that matter, imperial policies.

### Extend: “Yes, Racial Progress”

#### (e) Their dismissal of racial progress is wrong and disempowering.

Hrabowski 15 — Freeman Hrabowski III, President of the University of Maryland at Baltimore County, Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, serves as Consultant to the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Academies, was named one of “America’s Best Leaders” by *U.S. News & World Report*, one of the “100 Most Influential People in the World” by *Time Magazine*, and one of seven “Top American Leaders” by *The Washington Post* and the Kennedy Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration and Statistics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and honorary degrees from more than 20 institutions including Harvard University, Princeton University, Duke University, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Johns Hopkins University, and Georgetown University, 2015 (“Need a reason to believe there’s hope for racial progress? Look to Baltimore.,” *Washington Post*, July 10th, Available Online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/half-empty-half-full/2015/07/10/a6b9ed6a-25bd-11e5-b77f-eb13a215f593_story.html>, Accessed 07-26-2016)

More than 50 years ago, inspired by words that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in a Birmingham church, I joined hundreds of other children in a civil rights march through the streets of my home town. I was not a brave child, and I knew, as the others did, the risk of going to jail.

We marched, though, because his words gave us hope that the world could be different.

I am often asked how much society has changed since the 1960s and how the challenges we faced then compare with those of today.

My response reflects my ambivalence about our progress. As a child, I could not have imagined that I would one day become the president of a predominantly white research university, and I would not have guessed how many more people would have the opportunity to become educated. In 1960, less than 10 percent of Americans had earned bachelor’s degrees. Today, we’re up to nearly a third. In the same period, African Americans have gone from a college completion rate of about 3 percent to almost 20 percent, contributing to the growth of a thriving black middle class.

However, far too many families remain stuck in poverty. For them, conditions now are as bad as they were in the ’60s — if not worse. Drugs and guns, combined with damaging public policies, fuel a cycle of violence and mass incarceration. Many young people feel hopeless and betrayed.

Postsecondary education has become a requirement for many, if not most, of our society’s well-paying jobs. However, the recent gains in college completion are spread unevenly. For example, since 1975, the percentage of the wealthiest quarter of Americans earning four-year degrees has jumped from 38 percent to 79 percent, while the percentage for those at the bottom has barely moved, from 7 to 11 percent.

I am stunned and saddened by the growth of inequality in our society and the fact that many children have simply stopped dreaming about the future. Yet I also remind myself how far we’ve come. If we don’t count our progress, we lose sight of the lessons we’ve learned, and we run the risk of losing hope.

Public policies adopted in the 1960s and 1970s have helped so many of us. Landmark legislation, including the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Higher Education Act, strengthened schools, expanded civil rights and helped many more people graduate from college.

These changes were possible because Americans during that period truly believed that the world could be different than it was.

To address the stubborn challenges facing our society today, we again need reasons to believe that the world can change. We need hope.

I’d suggest we can find hope in a place that’s received considerable attention in recent weeks: Baltimore. I’ve lived and worked here the past 40 years, and I see the many ways this region reflects the country’s progress and its challenges.

In the ’60s, we had not yet seen a woman of any race as mayor of Baltimore (or almost any other major U.S. city) or African Americans in such leadership roles as chief executive of Baltimore Gas & Electric, or dean of the University of Maryland Medical School, or president of the University of Baltimore. Now we see all of these, among many other African American leaders.

The Baltimore region is also prosperous. A recent Brookings Institution analysis notes that it ranks seventh among the country’s 35 largest metropolitan areas in per capita income. It is second only to the District in median income for black households. Black professionals are doing well here.

Nevertheless, the region’s challenges are significant. About 11 percent of Baltimore City’s black residents are unemployed, compared with about 5 percent of white residents, according to the Brookings analysis. The city’s black poverty rate is just under 27 percent. While this is lower than the rate in three-quarters of large U.S. cities, such high poverty rates should be troubling to all of us.

The challenge now is to reflect on how we can extend the gains of the past 50 years to even more Americans. We have asked hard questions like this before. That alone should give us hope as we move forward in an effort to bring the benefits of our nation’s prosperity to all. We now have the opportunity — indeed, the responsibility — to look again at public policies in such areas as education and job training, housing and transportation, drug enforcement and incarceration.

I often think about the other children who marched in 1963. While we shared hopes and dreams, many of them never had the opportunities I did. Ultimately, they marched so that others could live their dreams.

Our challenge now is holding on to that legacy — and helping many more children turn possibilities into reality.

#### (f) Major progress *has* occurred despite continuing structural racism. “No progress” is a misinterpretation of history.

Winant 15 — Howard Winant, Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Director of the University of California Center for New Racial Studies, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, 2015 (“The Dark Matter: Race and Racism in the 21st Century,” *Critical Sociology*, Volume 41, Issue 2, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Sage Publications Online, p. 319-320)

The World-Historical Shitpile of Race

Structural racism – an odious stinkpile of shit left over from the past and still being augmented in the present – has been accumulated by ‘slavery unwilling to die’,4 by empire, and indeed by the entire racialized modern world system. The immense waste (Feagin et al., 2001, drawing on Bataille) of human life and labor by these historically entrenched social structures and practices still confronts us today, in the aftermath of the post-Second World War racial ‘break’. Our antiracist accomplishments have reduced the size of the pile; we have lessened the stink. But a massive amount of waste still remains. So much racial waste is left over from the practice of racial domination in the early days of empire and conquest, to the present combination of police state and liberalism! Indeed it often seems that this enormous and odious waste pinions the social system under an immovable burden. How often have despair and hopelessness overcome those who bore this sorrow? How often have slave and native, peon and maquiladora, servant and ghetto-dweller, felt just plain ‘sick and tired’ (Nappy Roots, 2003), encumbered by this deadening inertia composed of a racial injustice that could seemingly never be budged? How often, too, have whites felt weighed down by the waste, the guilt and self-destruction built into racism and the ‘psychological wage’?

Yet racial politics is always unstable and contradictory. Racial despotism can never be fully stabilized or consolidated. Thus at key historical moments, perhaps rare but also inevitable, the sheer weight of racial oppression – qua social structure – becomes insupportable. The built-up rage and inequity, the irrationality and inutility, and the explosive force of dreams denied, are mobilized politically in ways that would have seemed almost unimaginable earlier.

Racism remains formidable, entrenched as a structuring feature of both US and global society and politics. Indeed it often seems impossible to overcome.

Yet That’s Not the Whole Story

We are so used to losing! We can’t see that the racial system is in crisis both in the US and globally. Large-scale demographic and political shifts have overtaken the modern world (racial) system, undermining and rearticulating it. During and after the Second World War a tremendous racial ‘break’ occurred, a seismic shift that swept much of the world (Winant, 2001). The US was but one national ‘case’ of this rupture, which was experienced very profoundly: racial transformations occurred that were unparalleled since at least the changes brought about by the US Civil War. Omi and I (1994) – and many, many others – have proposed that the terrain of racial politics was tremendously broadened and deepened after the War. The increased importance of race in larger political life not only grounded the modern civil rights movement but shaped a whole range of ‘new social movements’ that we take for granted today as central axes of political conflict. In earlier stages of US history it had not been so evident that ‘the personal is political’ – at least not since the end of Reconstruction. From the explicit racial despotism of the Jim Crow era to the ‘racial democracy’ (of course still very partial and truncated) of the present period…: that is a big leap, people.

In the modern world there were always black movements, always movements for racial justice and racial freedom. The experience of injustice, concrete grievances, lived oppression, and resistance, both large and small, always exists. It can be articulated or not, politicized or not. These movements, these demands, were largely excluded from mainstream politics before the rise of the civil rights movement after the War. Indeed, after the Second World War, in a huge ‘break’ that was [end page 319] racially framed in crucial ways, this ‘politicization of the social’ swept over the world. It ignited (or reignited) major democratic upsurges. This included the explicitly anti-racist movements: the modern civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid movement, and the anti-colonial movement (India, Algeria, Vietnam, etc.). It also included parallel, and more-or-less allied, movements like ‘secondwave’ feminism, LGBTQ (née gay liberation) movements, and others.

In short, the world-historical upheaval of the Second World War and its aftermath were racial upheavals in significant ways: the periphery against the center, the colored ‘others’ against ‘The Lords of Human Kind’ (Kiernan, 1995). These movements produced:

\* Demographic, economic, political, and cultural shifts across the planet

\* The destruction of the old European empires

\* The coming and going of the Cold War

\* The rise of the ‘new social movements’, led by the black movement in the US

And this is only the start of what could be a much bigger list.

#### (g) Racial progress *is* possible — empirical evidence.

Omi and Winant 13 — Michael Omi, Associate Professor in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California-Berkeley, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, and Howard Winant, Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Director of the University of California Center for New Racial Studies, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, 2013 (“Resistance is futile?: a response to Feagin and Elias,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 36, Number 6, September, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Taylor & Francis Online, p. 970-971)

In conclusion, do Feagin and Elias really believe that white power is so complete, so extensive, so ‘sutured’ (as Laclau and Mouffe might say) as they suggest here? Do they mean to suggest, in Borg-fashion, that [end page 970] ‘resistance is futile?’ This seems to be the underlying political logic of the ‘systemic racism’ approach, perhaps unintentionally so. Is white racism so ubiquitous that no meaningful political challenge can be mounted against it? Are black and brown folk (yellow and red people, and also others unclassifiable under the always-absurd colour categories) utterly supine, duped, abject, unable to exert any political pressure? Is such a view of race and racism even recognizable in the USA of 2012? And is that a responsible political position to be advocating? Is this what we want to teach our students of colour? Or our white students for that matter?

We suspect that if pressed, Feagin and Elias would concur with our judgement that racial conflict, both within (and against) the state and in everyday life, is a fundamentally political process. We think that they would also accept our claim that the ongoing political realities of race provide extensive evidence that people of colour in the USA are not so powerless, and that whites are not so omnipotent, as Feagin and Elias’s analysis suggests them to be.

Racial formation theory allows us to see that there are contradictions in racial oppression. The racial formation approach reveals that white racism is unstable and constantly challenged, from the national and indeed global level down to the personal and intra-psychic conflicts that we all experience, no matter what our racial identity might be. While racism — largely white — continues to flourish, it is not monolithic. Yes, there have been enormous increases in racial inequality in recent years. But movement-based anti-racist opposition continues, and sometimes scores victories. Challenges to white racism continue both within the state and in civil society. Although largely and properly led by people of colour, anti-racist movements also incorporate whites such as Feagin and Elias themselves. Movements may experience setbacks, the reforms for which they fought may be revealed as inadequate, and indeed their leaders may be co-opted or even eliminated, but racial subjectivity and self-awareness, unresolved and conflictual both within the individual psyche and the body politic, abides. Resistance is not futile.

#### (h) Civil rights-era racial progress was real and meaningful.

Kennedy 14 — Randall Kennedy, Michael R. Klein Professor at Harvard Law School, Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Member of the American Philosophical Association, served as a Law Clerk to Justice Thurgood Marshall of the United States Supreme Court, holds a J.D. from Yale Law School, 2014 (“Black America's Promised Land: Why I Am Still a Racial Optimist,” *American Prospect*, November 10th, Available Online at <http://prospect.org/article/black-americas-promised-land-why-i-am-still-racial-optimist>, Accessed 07-26-2016)

We have failed to reach the racial Promised Land in either its conservative or its progressive definition. With respect to both of these destinations, our society remains far afield. Still, I put myself in the optimistic camp.

Why?

I am hopeful first and foremost because of the predominant trajectory of African Americans—a history that John Hope Franklin framed with the apt title From Slavery to Freedom. In 1860, four million African Americans were enslaved while another half-million were free but devoid of fundamental rights in many of the jurisdictions where they lived. In 1860, the very term “African American” was something of an oxymoron because the Supreme Court had ruled in Dred Scott v. Sandford that no black, free or enslaved, could be a citizen of the United States. But within a decade, the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) established birthright citizenship and required all states to accord all persons due process and equal protection of the laws, and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) prohibited states from withholding the right to vote on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. People who had been sold on the auction block as youngsters helped to govern their locales as public officials when they were adults. In 1861, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi resigned from the United States Senate to join the Confederate States of America, which he led as president. In 1870, Hiram Revels, the first black member of Congress, occupied the seat that Davis abandoned.

The First Reconstruction was overwhelmed by a devastating white supremacist reaction. But the most fundamental reforms it established proved resilient, providing the basis for a Second Reconstruction from the 1950s to the 1970s. During that period, too, the distance traveled by blacks was astonishing. In 1950, segregation was deemed to be consistent with federal constitutional equal protection. No federal law prevented proprietors of hotels, restaurants, and other privately owned public accommodations from engaging in racial discrimination. No federal law prohibited private employers from discriminating on a racial basis against applicants for jobs or current employees. No federal law effectively counteracted racial disenfranchisement. No federal law outlawed racial discrimination in private housing transactions. In contrast, by 1970 federal constitutional law thoroughly repudiated the lie of separate but equal. The 1964 Civil Rights Act forbade racial discrimination in privately owned places of public accommodation and many areas of private employment. The 1965 Voting Rights Act provided the basis for strong prophylactic action against racial exclusion at the ballot box. The 1968 Fair Housing Act addressed racial exclusion in a market that had been zealously insulated against federal regulation. None of these interventions were wholly successful. All were compromised. All occasioned backlash. But the racial situation in 1970 and afterwards was dramatically better than what it had been in 1950 and before.

#### (i) Don’t dismiss civil rights era gains even though they were incomplete.

Omi and Winant 13 — Michael Omi, Associate Professor in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California-Berkeley, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, and Howard Winant, Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Director of the University of California Center for New Racial Studies, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, 2013 (“Resistance is futile?: a response to Feagin and Elias,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 36, Number 6, September, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Taylor & Francis Online, p. 965-966)

What is distinctive about our own epoch in the USA (post-Second World War to the present) with respect to race and racism?

Over the past decades there has been a steady drumbeat of efforts to contain and neutralize civil rights, to restrict racial democracy, and to maintain or even increase racial inequality. Racial disparities in different institutional sites — employment, health, education — persist and in many cases have increased. Indeed, the post-2008 period has seen a dramatic increase in racial inequality. The subprime home mortgage crisis, for example, was a major racial event. Black and brown people were disproportionately affected by predatory lending practices; many lost their homes as a result; race-based wealth disparities widened tremendously. It would be easy to conclude, as Feagin and Elias do, that white racial dominance has been continuous and unchanging throughout US history. But such a perspective misses the dramatic twists and turns in racial politics that have occurred since the Second World War and the civil rights era.

Feagin and Elias claim that we overly inflate the significance of the changes wrought by the civil rights movement, and that we ‘overlook the serious reversals of racial justice and persistence of huge racial inequalities’ (Feagin and Elias 2012, p. 21) that followed in its wake. We do not. In Racial Formation we wrote about ‘racial reaction’ in a chapter of that name, and elsewhere in the book as well. Feagin and Elias devote little attention to our arguments there; perhaps because they are in substantial agreement with us. While we argue that the right wing was able to ‘rearticulate’ race and racism issues to roll back some of the gains of the civil rights movement, we also believe that there are limits to what the right could achieve in the post-civil rights political landscape.

So we agree that the present prospects for racial justice are demoralizing at best. But we do not think that is the whole story. US racial conditions have changed over the post-Second World War period, in ways that Feagin and Elias tend to downplay or neglect. Some of the major reforms of the 1960s have proved irreversible; they have set powerful democratic forces in motion. These racial (trans)formations were the results of unprecedented political mobilizations, led by the black movement, but not confined to blacks alone. Consider the desegregation of the armed forces, as well as key civil rights movement victories of the 1960s: the Voting Rights Act, the Immigration and Naturalization Act (Hart-Celler), as well [end page 965] as important court decisions like Loving v. Virginia that declared anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional. While we have the greatest respect for the late Derrick Bell, we do not believe that his ‘interest convergence hypothesis’ effectively explains all these developments. How does Lyndon Johnson’s famous (and possibly apocryphal) lament upon signing the Civil Rights Act on 2 July 1964 — ‘We have lost the South for a generation’ — count as ‘convergence’?

The US racial regime has been transformed in significant ways. As Antonio Gramsci argues, hegemony proceeds through the incorporation of opposition (Gramsci 1971, p. 182). The civil rights reforms can be seen as a classic example of this process; here the US racial regime — under movement pressure — was exercising its hegemony. But Gramsci insists that such reforms — which he calls ‘passive revolutions’ — cannot be merely symbolic if they are to be effective: oppositions must win real gains in the process. Once again, we are in the realm of politics, not absolute rule.

So yes, we think there were important if partial victories that shifted the racial state and transformed the significance of race in everyday life. And yes, we think that further victories can take place both on the broad terrain of the state and on the more immediate level of social interaction: in daily interaction, in the human psyche and across civil society. Indeed we have argued that in many ways the most important accomplishment of the anti-racist movement of the 1960s in the USA was the politicization of the social. In the USA and indeed around the globe, race-based movements demanded not only the inclusion of racially defined ‘others’ and the democratization of structurally racist societies, but also the recognition and validation by both the state and civil society of racially-defined experience and identity. These demands broadened and deepened democracy itself. They facilitated not only the democratic gains made in the USA by the black movement and its allies, but also the political advances towards equality, social justice and inclusion accomplished by other ‘new social movements’: second- wave feminism, gay liberation, and the environmentalist and anti-war movements among others.

By no means do we think that the post-war movement upsurge was an unmitigated success. Far from it: all the new social movements were subject to the same ‘rearticulation’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. xii) that produced the racial ideology of ‘colourblindness’ and its variants; indeed all these movements confronted their mirror images in the mobilizations that arose from the political right to counter them. Yet even their incorporation and containment, even their confrontations with the various ‘backlash’ phenomena of the past few decades, even the need to develop the highly contradictory ideology of ‘colour- blindness’, reveal the transformative character of the ‘politicization of the social’. While it is not possible here to explore so extensive a subject, [end page 966] it is worth noting that it was the long-delayed eruption of racial subjectivity and self-awareness into the mainstream political arena that set off this transformation, shaping both the democratic and anti- democratic social movements that are evident in US politics today.

#### (j) The negative trends they identify are politically contingent. Reforms *have* and *can* transform racial realities. Resistance is not futile.

Omi and Winant 13 — Michael Omi, Associate Professor in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California-Berkeley, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, and Howard Winant, Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Director of the University of California Center for New Racial Studies, holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, 2013 (“Resistance is futile?: a response to Feagin and Elias,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 36, Number 6, September, Available Online to Subscribing Institutions via Taylor & Francis Online, p. 968-969)

We still want to acknowledge that blacks have been catching hell and have borne the brunt of the racist reaction of the past several [end page 968] decades. For example, we agree with Feagin and Elias’s critique of the reactionary politics of incarceration in the USA. The ‘new Jim Crow’ (Alexander 2012) or even the ‘new slavery’ that the present system practises is something that was just in its beginning stages when we were writing Racial Formation. It is now recognized as a national and indeed global scandal. How is it to be understood? Of course there are substantial debates on this topic, notably about the nature of the ‘prison-industrial complex’ (Davis 2003, p. 3) and the social and cultural effects of mass incarceration along racial lines. But beyond Feagin and Elias’s denunciation of the ferocious white racism that is operating here, deeper political implications are worth considering. As Alexander (2012), Mauer (2006), Manza and Uggen (2008) and movement groups like Critical Resistance and the Ella Baker Center argue, the upsurge over recent decades in incarceration rates for black (and brown) men expresses the fear-based, law-and-order appeals that have shaped US racial politics since the rise of Nixonland (Perlstein 2008) and the ‘Southern strategy’. Perhaps even more central, racial repression aims at restricting the increasing impact of voters of colour in a demographically shifting electorate.

There is a lot more to say about this, but for the present two key points stand out: first, it is not an area where Feagin and Elias and we have any sharp disagreement, and second, for all the horrors and injustices that the ‘new Jim Crow’ represents, incarceration, profiling and similar practices remain political issues. These practices and policies are not ineluctable and unalterable dimensions of the US racial regime. There have been previous waves of reform in these areas. They can be transformed again by mass mobilization, electoral shifts and so on. In other words, resistance is not futile.

### Extend: “Fatalism Destroys Agency”

#### (k) Fatalism forecloses political agency and cements white supremacy.

Rogers 15 — Melvin L. Rogers, Scott Waugh Chair in the Division of the Social Sciences and Associate Professor of Political Science and African American Studies at the University of California-Los Angeles, former Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Faculty Associate in the Department of Political Science at Emory University, holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Yale University, 2015 (“Between Pain and Despair: What Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Missing,” *Dissent*, July 31st, Available Online at <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/between-world-me-ta-nehisi-coates-review-despair-hope>, Accessed 07-26-2016)

Coates rejects the hubris of the idea that racial progress is a necessary feature of American life. As he writes, “one cannot, at once, claim to be superhuman and then plead mortal error.” American exceptionalism does not allow for the confession of fallibility. That myth serves as a blinding light for those caught within it; Americans spin out “dreams” of their greatness, of their moral purity, or more modestly of their long journey to redeem the past.

One is reminded of William Bennett’s response to CNN’s Anderson Cooper during Obama’s triumphant campaign in 2008. “Does anyone know,” asked Anderson, “what this means in terms of change of race relations in the United States?” Bennett responded: “I will tell you one thing it means as the former Secretary of Education: You don’t take any excuses anymore from anybody.” His point was clear: Obama’s rise to the presidency settled the problem of race relations and racial discrimination. Obama was the fulfillment of the American promise, effectively allowing one to deny the residue of racial discrimination that otherwise continues to determine the life chances of black folk.

The Dream seems to run so deep that it eludes those caught by it. Between the World and Me initially seems like a book that will reveal the illusion and, in that moment, might open up the possibility for imagining the United States anew. Remember: “Nothing about the world is meant to be.”

But the book does not move in that direction. Coates rejects the myth of American exceptionalism and its logic of certain progress. Yet he embraces the certainty of white supremacy and its inescapable constraints. For him, white supremacy is not merely a historically emergent feature of the Western world generally, and the United States in particular. For Coates, white supremacy does not merely structure reality; it is reality.

There is a danger in this. After all, the meaning of action is tied fundamentally to what we imagine is possible for us. But when one views white supremacy as impregnable, there is little room for one’s imagination to soar and one’s sense of agency is inescapably constrained. “The missing thing,” Coates writes, “was related to the plunder of our bodies, the fact that any claim to ourselves, to the hands that secured us, the spine that braced us, and the head that directed us, was contestable.”

The black body is one of the unifying themes of the book. It resonates well in our American ears because the hallmark of freedom is sovereign control over one’s body. This was the site on which slavery did its most destructive work: controlling the body to enslave the soul. We see the reconstitution of this logic in the unjust policing and imprisonment of black men and women. There can be no redemptive politics when race functions primarily as a wounded attachment—when our bodies are the visible reminders that we live at the arbitrary whim of another. But what of those young protestors in the streets of Ferguson, Chicago, New York, and Charleston?

Coates’s implicit answer to this question appears in one of the pivotal and most tragic moments of the book—the murder of a college friend, Prince Jones, at the hands of the police. As Coates says: “This entire episode took me from fear to a rage that burned in me then, animates me now, and will likely leave me on fire for the rest of my days.” With his soul on fire, all his senses are directed to the pain white supremacy produces, the wounds it creates. This murder should not be read as a function of the actions of a police officer or even the logic of policing blacks in the United States. His account of this strikes a darker chord. What he tells us about the meaning of the death of Prince Jones, what we ought to understand, reveals the operating logic of the “universe”:

She [Coates’s mother] knew that the galaxy itself could kill me, that all of me could be shattered and all of her legacy spilled upon the curb like bum wine. And no one would be brought to account for this destruction, because my death would not be the fault of any human but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of ‘race,’ imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgment of invisible gods. The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon will not bend under indictment. They sent the killer of Prince Jones back to his work, because he was not a killer at all. He was a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s physical laws.

But if we are all just helpless agents of physical laws, the question again emerges: what should one do? Coates recommends interrogation and struggle—investigation of the myths by which we seemingly live and struggle against the tendency to be seduced by those myths. His love for books and his years at Howard University, “Mecca,” as he calls it, allowed him to question the world around him. But interrogation and struggle to what end? His answer is contained in his preoccupation with using natural disasters as metaphors for discussing black life in the United States. In response, one might say, at one time we thought the Gods were angry with us or that they were moving furniture around, thus causing earthquakes. Now we know earthquakes are the result of tectonic shifts. Okay, what do we do with that knowledge? Coates seems to say: construct an early warning system—don’t waste energy trying to stop the earthquake itself.

There is a lesson in this: “Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen. . . . And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.”

One might respect this judgment because it emerges from a clear-sightedness that leaves one standing upright in the face of the truth of the matter—namely, that white people will never enable black bodies to be treated the same as theirs. “It is truly horrible,” Coates writes in one of the most disturbing sentences of the book, “to understand yourself as the essential below of your country.” Coates’s sentences are often pitched as frank speech; it is what it is.

Herein lies the danger. Forget telling his son it will be okay. Coates cannot even tell him that it may be okay. “The struggle is really all I have for you,” he tells his son, “because it is the only portion of this world under your control.” What a strange form of control. Black folks may control their place in the battle, but never with the possibility that they, and in turn the country to which they belong, may win.

Producing the book at this moment—as black lives are under public assault and black youths, in particular, are attempting to imagine the world anew—seems an odd thing to do. For all his channeling of James Baldwin, Coates seems to have forgotten that black folks “can’t afford despair.” As Baldwin went on to say: “I can’t tell my nephew, my niece; you can’t tell the children there is no hope.” The reason why you can’t say this is not because you are living in a dream or selling a fantasy, but because there can be no certain knowledge of the future. Humility, borne out of our lack of knowledge of the future, justifies hope.

#### (l) Racial pessimism is fatalistic and wrong.

Kennedy 14 — Randall Kennedy, Michael R. Klein Professor at Harvard Law School, Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Member of the American Philosophical Association, served as a Law Clerk to Justice Thurgood Marshall of the United States Supreme Court, holds a J.D. from Yale Law School, 2014 (“Black America's Promised Land: Why I Am Still a Racial Optimist,” *American Prospect*, November 10th, Available Online at <http://prospect.org/article/black-americas-promised-land-why-i-am-still-racial-optimist>, Accessed 07-26-2016)

Today, at a moment when progress has stalled, we need to recall how dramatically and unexpectedly conditions sometimes change. Until recently who’d-a thunk it possible for the president to be an African American? In the 1980s, I used to ask law students how long affirmative action programs ought to last. Champions of such programs, seeking to ensure their longevity, would say that affirmative action would be needed until the country elected a black president. That reply would elicit appreciative laughter as listeners supposed that that formula would preserve affirmative action for at least a century. But then along came Barack Obama and with him the remark that soon became a cliché: “I never thought that I’d live to see a black president.”

Obama’s election is much more than a monument to one politician’s talent and good fortune. Changes in public attitudes, law, and custom have clearly elevated the fortunes of African Americans as individuals and black America as a collectivity. Hard facts may give plausibility to the pessimistic tradition, but they make the optimistic tradition compelling. Despite the many wrongs that remain to be righted, blacks in America confront fewer racist impediments now than ever before in the history of the United States. The courage, intelligence, persistence, idealism, and sacrifice of Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks, Julian Bond and Bob Moses, Medgar Evers and Bayard Rustin, Viola Liuzzo and Vernon Dahmer—and countless other tribunes for racial justice—have not been expended for naught. The facts of day-to-day life allow blacks to sing more confidently than ever before James Weldon Johnson’s magnificent hymn “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” often referred to as the Black National Anthem:

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past

has taught us

Sing a song full of the hope that the present

has brought us

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun

Let us march on till victory is won.

My optimism involves more than a sociological prediction. I am also swayed by my intuition regarding which of these hypotheses—the pessimistic or the optimistic—will do the most good. Hope is a vital nutrient for effort; without it, there is no prospect for achievement. The belief that we can overcome makes more realistic the possibility that we shall overcome. Optimism gives buoyancy to thinking that might otherwise degenerate into nihilism, encourages solidarity in those who might otherwise be satisfied by purely selfish indulgence, invites strategic planning that can usefully harness what might otherwise be impotent indignation, and inspires efforts that might otherwise be avoided due to fatalism.

On Election Day 1996, exit polling showed General Colin Powell beating President Bill Clinton by a comfortable margin. But Powell was not Clinton’s opponent. Senator Bob Dole was. Powell had considered seeking the Republican Party nomination but declined in the end to do so. Before he made that decision, polls suggested that he could win the nomination and the general election, but friends were skeptical. Powell recalls that Earl Graves, the publisher of Black Enterprise magazine, told him, “Look, man … [w]hen [white voters] go in that booth, they ain’t going to vote for you.” Maybe Graves was correct. Real voting might have produced different results from the polls. Furthermore, whereas the actual candidates had suffered a year of merciless scrutiny on the campaign trail, Powell on Election Day was a mere hypothetical candidate who suffered from none of the wear and tear that a presidential contest exacts. At the end of a campaign, the general might not have remained so attractive. Still, Powell’s apparent popularity does provide a basis for conjecturing that America’s readiness to elect a black president had been an unrecognized part of the political landscape for longer than many had appreciated. Powell may well have denied himself the opportunity to make a successful historic leap by being self-defeatingly pessimistic.

A major fear of many blacks is that acknowledging progress will prompt underestimation of racial obstacles that blacks at every socioeconomic level continue to face. When Americans are polled about their perceptions of racial affairs, whites are typically more upbeat than blacks. The more affluent they are, the more upbeat white observers tend to be. Inordinately impressed by progress, they all too often prematurely declare victory over racism.

Although complacency nourished by an overly rosy view of racial affairs is a real danger, I stand by my conviction that a clear-eyed assessment favors black optimism. Who, after all, have been the figures most beneficial to blacks? Was it the Martin Delany who decamped for Africa, thinking America to be irremediably racist? Or was it the Martin Delany who returned, recruited blacks for the Union, and participated significantly in Southern politics during Reconstruction? Was it the pre-1966 Stokely Carmichael who sang “We Shall Overcome” in the splendid early days of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)? Or was it the post-1966 Stokely Carmichael (later renamed Kwame Ture) whose impatient bitterness helped to destroy the SNCC and rationalize an indulgent exile to Guinea that squandered a substantial talent? Was it my long-time colleague of blessed memory, Derrick Bell, who posited the permanence of racist white dominance? Or was it a student who rightly admired Professor Bell but eschewed his pessimism and followed a different path, a black student who, years later, put Bell’s hypothesis to a test by seeking the highest elected office in the land under the slogan “Yes We Can!”?

That student, of course, was Barack Obama, and his presidency has been the setting for much debate between pessimists and optimists. Some detractors, perhaps the angriest, started from a position of raised expectations. They thought that Obama embodied the “audacity of hope” and that he would somehow bring about sweeping changes. Disappointed, they have expressed themselves in the angry, accusatory rhetoric of betrayal. Obama, Cornel West charges, “posed as a progressive and turned out to be counterfeit.” Others condemn Obama but without disappointment. They see their low expectations as having been validated.

Certain pessimists have maintained that Obama’s election indicated little in terms of “real” racial progress. They even discount the symbolic significance of his ascendancy, stressing his exceptionality. Although he calls himself black, Obama is the offspring of a black African father and a white American mother and is thus distinguished genealogically from most African Americans. Much was made of his Muslim-sounding name. But some observers maintain that popular acceptance of that, too, should be viewed skeptically. It would have signaled more, they argue, had America elected a black person raised in, say, Detroit with a name such as Tyrone Washington or Jamal Jefferson. Pessimists argue that, substantively, the Obama presidency has delivered no more to blacks than would have been delivered by any other centrist-liberal Democrat (say, Hillary Clinton), and that in certain respects the Obama presidency delivered less because Obama sought excessively to prove that he was a president for all Americans and not merely black Americans. They contend that Obama’s blackness was an asset that he used for personal marketing and that the white establishment seized upon for advertising, “The United States cannot sensibly be accused of practicing or condoning racism! It just elected a black president!” Pessimists will now also enlist the horrifying events in Ferguson, Missouri, to reinforce their claim that despite the civil rights movement, antidiscrimination legislation, affirmative action, and the election of Obama, the narrative of race relations in America is a doleful tale—not a march upward from slavery to freedom, but a trek sideways from plantation to ghetto.

What is an optimist in the waning years of the Obama presidency to say in the face of this challenge?

Obama’s election signaled a dramatic, substantive change in racial beliefs and attitudes. In 1960, his victory would have been impossible: Too many whites would have been unwilling to vote for a black candidate—any black candidate—because of doubts about the capacities of anyone of black African ancestry. Recall that there were no black cabinet officers until Johnson appointed Robert Weaver as secretary of housing and urban development in 1966, and no black Supreme Court justices until Johnson nominated Thurgood Marshall in 1967. The specter of black intellectual and characterological deficiency stunted the careers of many talented blacks, and still does. That Obama was able to win the presidency—twice—is a sign that rumors of racial inferiority, while still extant, are much diminished in influence.

In thinking about the meaning of Obama, it is important, too, to focus on the special status of the presidency. The person who occupies that office is not only the head of the executive branch of the federal government, the person who nominates all federal judges, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and thus a person with the wherewithal to destroy most, if not all, of humankind. The president is also the nation’s mourner-in-chief, booster-in-chief, spouse-in-chief, and parent-in-chief. That a black man has been the master of the White House for the past six years does indeed reflect and reinforce a remarkable socio-psychological transformation in the American racial scene. If that is “tokenism,” give us more of it.

I have emphasized progress that blacks have made in absolute terms: where they stood 50 years ago and where they stand today. But what about the position of blacks relative to whites—those yawning gaps in wealth, income, educational attainment, and risk of imprisonment that have remained unclosed and that have, in some ways, widened even further during Obama’s tenure? There is no use denying that reality. America remains racially stratified and will continue to be long after the Obama presidency.

There is also no use, however, in denying other facets of the American racial reality. One is a comparative view. In considering the appropriate attitude to adopt toward America—allegiance, for example, or dis-affiliation—it is sensible to compare the United States to other divided societies. Negrophobia in America is, alas, all too present. But it pales in comparison with the prejudice against racial, ethnic, religious, and national minorities in many countries around the globe. As bad as the American racial problem is, as urgently as it calls for concentrated attention, its condition is less dire and more encouraging than might be gleaned from an analysis that views the American situation in isolation, divorced from international comparisons.

There is also no good purpose served by ignoring manifestations of progress that display themselves even in heartrending crises. Consider the events in Ferguson. The killing of the unarmed teenager, the callous inattentiveness to his body, the militarized police response to protest, and the dubious investigation by local authorities of this tragic death display much of what is terrible in American race relations: an atavistic fear of young black men; quick resort to excessive force against African Americans; racial residential separation; black powerlessness that foments resentment; white dominance that encourages contempt; an utter lack of mutual trust. But the events in Ferguson have also revealed other responses. The federal government took note of what happened and actively involved itself via the president, attorney general, and the director of the FBI. The Ferguson tragedy became the leading news story all over the country. Blacks have not been the only ones calling the police to account and demanding reform. Whites from various walks of life, including right-wing politicians like Rand Paul, have also been doing so. Never in American history, in analogous circumstances, has there been a higher level of interracial empathy.

Overcoming the racial burdens—individual, communal, institutional—that encumber us will take unremitting effort, major deployments of intelligence and imagination, daunting amounts of time, huge expenditures of money, and the resolute conviction that America’s racial affairs can and will improve. Is the uncertain prospect of a better future worth that investment? The lessons of American history and a comparison of our society with others around the world impel me to say yes. I am a racial optimist. Only time will tell whether my faith is wise.

#### (m) Civil society *can* be changed, but only if we treat it as an ongoing project and not an irredeemable fact.

Chandhoke 10 — Neera Chandhoke, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Developing Countries Research Centre at the University of Delhi, 2010 (“Civil Society,” *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*, Edited by Andrea Cornwall and Deborah Eade, Published by Practical Action Publishing, ISBN 9781853397066, p. 182-183)

Civil society as a project

The moment we perceive civil society from the vantage point of marginalised groups, we may be forced to accept that there is a deep and perhaps irresolvable tension between the acknowledged virtues of the sphere and its actual functioning. Yet social movements can, through struggle, expand and even transform the sphere of civil society. They can do this by demanding that civil society deliver what it promises in theory: freedom from domination, freedom to achieve self-realisation, freedom to assert selfhood. Far from being a given, civil society is a project whereby individuals can realise their self through engagement, contestation, and affirmation.

Civil society is a project in another sense. Theorists as eminent as Adam Smith (1776) and Georg Hegel (1821), who were to conceptualise civil society in the first instance, saw it as a deeply troublesome sphere. They were perfectly aware of the many incivilities that civil society was capable of; and for neither could the sphere reproduce itself without deliberate intervention to tame it. We only need to look at post-‘velvet revolution’ Eastern Europe in order to insert a word of caution into the celebratory notes on civil society: for, once civil society had been resurrected in this context, people found that they really did not want it.

The dismantling of state institutions and the opening out of markets has inevitably led to uncompromising austerity, massive unemployment, discrimination against ethnic minorities, and resultant ethnic explosions. The rolling back of the state from any kind of responsibility for the people has left those who cannot fend for themselves at the mercy of those who are in a position to profit from new arrangements. People in this part of the world, it is obvious, have been as quickly disenchanted with civil society as they had been enchanted by the invocation of the concept.

Yet for all the hubris associated with civil society, it remains a valuable term. This is not because it is a precondition for democracy, or ‘democratisation’ as political conditionalities would have it, but because it is a site where various groups can engage with each other in projects of all kinds. Its absence would mean the absence of democracy, and of the freedom that is necessary for democratic engagement. By asserting civil society, people demand that regimes recognise the competence of the political public to chart out a discourse on the content and the limits of what is politically desirable and democratically permissible. In the heady days when theorists brought ‘Civil Society Back In’, the domain came to be increasingly conceptualised without reference to the state. Now any self-respecting scholar knows that civil society can be conceptualised only in relation to the state, and vice versa.

The de-linking of the state and civil society has greatly impoverished our understanding of both concepts. Those theorists who waxed eloquent on the need for people to connect were to stray away from the shadowy peripheries of actually existing civil societies and underplay the ambiguous relationship of this sphere with democracy. Such formulations obfuscate the conflict within, [end page 182] and the general incivility of much of civil society, because they are completely indifferent to the notion of power.

Taking a long hard look within civil society itself focuses our attention on power equations of all kinds: on material deprivation, unevenly shared conceptual understanding, dominant and marginal languages, and the many oppressions, the many incivilities, the many banishments of civil society. Some groups possess overlapping political, material, symbolic, and social power; others possess nothing, not even access to the means of life. The former find a space in civil society, and civil society finds a place for them; the latter are banished to the dark periphery of the sphere. The irony is that even though most countries of the developing world are primarily rural, it is the urban middle-class agenda that is best secured by the invocation of civil society. The agenda of oppressed and marginal peasants, or of the tribals who are struggling for freedom, remain unrepresented either in the theory or in the practice of civil society. Therefore, in order to find a voice, marginal groups may well have to storm the ramparts of civil society, to break down the gates, and make a forcible entry into the sphere.